ONCE UPON AN ACADEMY

SONG OF SEAS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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ONCE UPON AN ACADEMY #4

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CONTENTS

Keep Up To Date

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Epilogue

Author Note

Also by Laura Greenwood

About the Author

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BLURB

Matilda's dream of attending the Academy and practising music have come true, but that doesn't stop the sea from calling her name.

When she saves a handsome officer-in-training from drowning, she finds herself embroiled in the prophecy she's been trying to avoid.

Can Matilda save herself from turning into seafoam? Or is she another doomed mermaid?

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Song Of Seas is part of the Once Upon An Academy series and is a retelling of the Little Mermaid.

PROLOGUE

SIX MONTHS AGO

The water feels so good against my skin after a long week in the castle attending lessons and wearing the clothing preferred by humans. Even the looser style I've adopted since coming to Grimm Academy is tighter than I'd like them to be compared to how it feels when my body is covered in scales and there's nothing between me and the cool water.

At least I have the lake. I've never been officially told I'm allowed to use it to transform and swim in, but the Headmistress is aware I'm mer, and she knows I can't do this in the bath. Not that I haven't tried. It just ended in disaster when I freaked out another girl with my tail.

I roll my eyes at the memory. I don't know what bothered her so much. It's just a part of my body. She wouldn't have been as spooked by my feet.

Maybe. I don't actually know that. But I know people, and a lot of them seem to have a problem with what I am for one reason or another even if that makes no sense at all. I have the same kinds of problems as humans do, even down to the stupid prophecy I have hanging over my head. That's the main reason I'm here and not being taught by a governess like some of my sisters.

I sigh and dive down into the lake, letting the action chase away my thoughts as I flick my tail and propel myself even deeper. The lake is

beautiful in its own way, but it's nothing compared to the depths and treasures the oceans have to offer and I find myself still longing to feel salt against my skin. It's refreshing in a way that freshwater isn't. That's where baths do help. I can dump a small heap of salt in when I fill the tub and soak for as long as I need to.

I'm not sure how long I spend floating around beneath the surface. It almost feels as if time works differently here, though I know that's not true. While the lake may not be a good replacement for the sea, it does have some advantages. No one needs anything from me here. There are no parents, or sisters, or anyone else who needs me. Everything can be about the swim and the water.

I sigh, letting little bubbles of air escape from me and travel up towards the surface. I love the way they float, even if it means I'll have to return to the surface sooner. It's a common misconception that mer can breathe underwater. We can't. But we can hold our breath for a long time, not unlike the way dolphins and whales do.

Something disturbs the top of the water, making me freeze in position as I try and work out what's caused it.

A stone plummets through the lake, narrowly missing me on its way to the bed.

Uh oh. That's not good. Someone must be skimming stones, and while that's not bad in itself, it isn't great for someone like me who is floating around in the lake and definitely *doesn't* want to get hit by one.

I debate whether to risk going to the surface or if I should dive further down to try and avoid getting hurt. That's probably the best option. If I pop up unexpectedly, I'll probably scare the students hanging around the lake and manage to start rumours about a monster living here. Somehow, I don't think that's the best option for me. Especially if anyone puts two and two together and comes to the conclusion that it's me causing it.

Before I can dive deeper, a bigger splash follows the small ones. It takes a moment for me to realise what's happened and propel into motion.

With a couple of flicks of my tail, I'm powering towards the surface, searching with my enhanced vision for the person who must have fallen in. While I don't want anyone to talk about me swimming in the lake and getting the wrong idea, I also don't want someone to drown while I can do something to stop him.

Someone thrashes back and forth in the water, trying to get to the surface, but they clearly don't know how to swim and their clothing is pulling them down more. I don't know why they don't teach humans more about what to do if they fall into a body of water and aren't lucky enough to be in the presence of a mer who can save them.

I reach the body and wrap my arms around him tightly, recognising his clothing as one of the uniforms worn by the officers-in-training who sometimes call Grimm Academy home. I'm not sure how it works, only that they're here sometimes, and not others.

My tail gives me more power than I have in my human form, letting me swim us both up to the surface. The officer in my grasp seems to have either realised what I'm doing, or he's running out of air, as he isn't thrashing around as much. I hope it's the former, but fear it isn't.

I break out of the surface and haul him along with me. I don't shift my form back to human yet. It would be easier to move if I did, but this way gives me more power to try and push the officer out of the water and to safety.

He splutters, spewing water out over him as he coughs and turns onto his side.

I breathe a sigh of relief. At least I got to him before anything bad happened. I glance around to see if I can locate whoever he came here with. People don't often come to the lake on their own.

Unless they're me.

But no one is around. I hope it's because his friend has gone to go and get help and not because he wants to avoid getting into trouble if anything went wrong.

The officer I've saved reaches out to me.

I pause, tucking a strand of dark hair behind my ear as I try to make a decision about whether or not I should stay.

He catches my eye and the two of us stare at one another, neither of us saying a word.

I break eye contact and delve back into the water. I don't know whether or not he's really noticed me, or given any thought to what I might be, but I don't want him to think too hard about it. As it stands, no one is going to believe what he's seen considering he almost drowned.

Even as I approach the deeper waters of the lake, I know that he isn't going to be the only one who is going to keep thinking about this in the

weeks ahead. I'm not sure I'm going to be able to close my eyes without seeing his face.

CHAPTER ONE

The seawater is so much better against my skin than the freshwater of the lake at the academy, but I know I can't complain too much with how the academy has been accommodating towards my need to swim.

The currents change, announcing that someone is approaching my room. It's the only warning I have thanks to the lack of doors in the underwater complex. They're impractical under the waves, but are something I greatly miss about living on land. It's so much better to have privacy.

I relax at the flash of golden scales which announce my younger sister. At least it's not Mother. She's been trying to convince me to leave the academy and come back to the sea to study with our governess, and won't take no for an answer. I've been under the impression that she wants me to attend Grimm until now. But it seems that isn't the case.

"Mother and Father request our presence," Cordelia says as she rights herself with a few deft movements of her tail.

"What is it now?" I ask in the same series of clicks and whistles she's used to speak. While we all speak human tongues fluently, they're highly impractical under the water, meaning we have to use a different way to communicate when we're together in the sea.

"I don't know. Another event? You know what it's like at this time of year."

I sigh. "I thought yesterday was the final day of the New Year celebrations?"

"Officially. But maybe they want to do something just with the family?"

I raise an eyebrow. Since when have they done anything with the family that couldn't be trotted out in front of the masses? Father is too under the control of Mother for that, and she has her eye on the future election. While we're technically royalty at the moment, that can change in a few months when Father has to be re-elected in order to stay King. I don't think I've ever come across another system of governance that works this way, but it's what I've grown up with and know.

"Let's get this over with," I mutter.

Cordelia lets out a small laugh. "Maybe you can convince Mother and Father to let me visit you at Grimm."

"I don't think they'll agree to that, Delia," I say sadly. It's not that I don't want her there, the two of us will have a lovely time. We've always been close, and being away from her is one of the things I dislike the most about living away from home.

"But they let you go..."

"Barely. And I won't be surprised if they don't let me go back."

"They will. They won't want to see the tuition they've paid go to waste."

I grimace. I hope she's right, but with the way Mother has been talking, I fear she isn't.

She reaches out and takes my hand. "Come on. We can get it over with and then we can go see the coral reefs. They're looking particularly lovely at the moment, and there's even a school of dolphins around at the moment."

"When you put it like that..."

Cordelia doesn't give me a chance to finish my response and pulls me through the doorway.

She lets go of my hand once we're out in the hallway, knowing that it would be easier for us both to swim if we aren't still hand-in-hand.

The swim to the family receiving room is a short one and it passes in a couple of minutes. The room we enter is a lot bigger than my bedroom, which it has to be in order to hold my entire family at once. Mer need a lot

of room to move around, and even more so when there are several of us in the same room.

My eldest brother floats off to the side, barely paying attention to us entering. I'm not surprised. He's always been more interested in himself than anyone else. He's always assumed he'll take over from Father when the time comes, forgetting that he needs to be liked for that to be the case.

"Ah, good, you're here," Mother says. "Cordelia, you can go."

"But..."

The glare Mother gives her even manages to make me flinch. I don't know why she sent Cordelia to collect me under the pretence that they wanted all of us when that isn't the reality. It's cruel to say the least.

Cordelia throws me a sympathetic look but turns to leave all the same. It's wise. If she stays, all that's going to happen is that she's going to attract Mother's ire for no other reason than being in the room. It's better for her if she goes.

"You're returning to the academy tomorrow?" Mother asks me once she's gone.

"Yes." As she's well aware. I ran all of my plans by her when I first arrived. Luckily for me, the academy doesn't have a strict holiday calendar that we all have to abide by. I think it's because they realise that every kingdom puts a different importance on different holidays. While Yuletide is important in some kingdoms, for us it is the New Year celebrations that are more sacred. While I'm missing classes to be here, it's no more or less than most of the other students will miss over the course of the year as they go home to celebrate their own holidays and festivals.

"You should change your mind."

"I do not wish to," I respond.

"Matilda..." The warning tone in her voice would have been enough to stop me from arguing back in years gone by, but I'm not the same person I was when I left for my first academy. She can't intimidate me with words.

"I wish to return to the academy and continue with my studies."

"Is this because of *music*?" She spits the word as if it's dirty, though I don't know why. We sing under the water, it's not like we don't have anything to do with it. But she's always disliked my desire to learn how to play land-instruments.

"Not everything is about music." Though it does play a part in it. I miss the instruments I can play on land. Among other things.

"Hmm."

"There's my prophecy," I point out.

Mother raises an eyebrow. "And do you have any proof that it's starting?"

"No, but..."

"So it's likely all just a fabrication of the sea witch's imagination."

I close my eyes and try not to lose my temper. That's the point at which Father will get involved. For a man with so much power, he seems to care very little for the things that go on around him.

Not for the first time, I find myself wondering whether it's Mother who holds the true power, even beyond this room.

"The prophecies aren't just imagination. I know someone who has only just gone through hers. What if I return to the sea and then don't have the means to stop it from coming true?" I'm not sure how valid my argument is. In theory, it's as easy for me to stop my prophecy from coming true here as it is at the academy now I know the details of it.

I think. I'm not completely sure about that. Grimm Academy has a reputation for being able to help students stop their prophecies from coming true. The only proof I have of them helping is that when Gerda's prophecy was starting to become her reality, we had several lessons that helped her learn the things she needed to. I don't think that's a coincidence, no matter what anyone else says.

Mother folds her arms. "Why are you being so stubborn about this?"

"You're the ones who sent me to the land academies in the first place," I point out.

"That's because we weren't aware of what the humans think of us. But we've watched all of the mer return to the sea with their hearts broken because of how they've been treated. Are you *really* telling me that they treat you any differently?"

I pause so I can mull over my words before answering. I've seen what she's talking about first-hand many times, and it isn't right. But disappearing back into the sea every time someone says a nasty word against us isn't the answer.

"It's different at this academy," I insist. And in a way, I'm right. I've found human friends at Grimm, which is different from the other academies I've attended.

"Hmm."

"I am going back, Mother. I know you don't approve, but until my prophecy has been stopped, I do not wish to put myself in excess danger by pulling out of class."

I don't wait for her to respond. There's no arguing with her and I have some packing to do.

I spin around, my tail producing a stream of bubbles in my wake. With a few powerful thrusts, I propel myself out of the room and away from the ensuing argument. I don't have the energy to disagree with her. It's best if I leave and spend my time packing instead.

CHAPTER TWO

I CLOSE my eyes and let the music wash over me. In a lot of ways, it refreshes me almost as much as being underwater does. I'm not sure what it is about the feel of an instrument in my hands and the way I can make the notes dance, but it fills me with a sense of peace and belonging unlike anything else I've ever experienced.

It's one of the reasons I can't bring myself to return to the sea any sooner than I have to. I love my home, but it isn't right for me to only live there. I can see myself growing old in a cottage by the coast, able to swim whenever I wish to, but also able to live in a place that allows me to still have my music.

It's an idle dream, and not one I'm likely to be able to see through. My future is most likely going to consist of nothing more than the normal things the daughter of a mer noble does.

A knock sounds on my door, pulling me out of my haze and causing a shrieking noise from my fiddle. I grimace. At least there isn't anyone around to overhear the mistake.

"Come in."

The door creaks, reminding me of how much I love being able to have the privacy it provides.

"So it's true, you're back," Gerda says as she steps inside with a tray of tea balanced precariously on one hand.

"If you didn't think I was back, why did you bring tea?"

She sets it down on my desk and shrugs. "I would have taken it to Kai if you hadn't been in."

"Hmm." I'm not sure I believe her. Especially as her sweetheart lives in the other dorm tower. Technically, she's not supposed to go to his room, but no one seems to listen to those rules.

I carefully lay my fiddle in its case, knowing there's not going to be any more practice for a while. I don't plan to put my instrument at risk even if the conversation is a short one. It took me months to save up enough money to buy it from my allowance. My parents would never finance a land instrument.

Gerda hands me a cup of tea as soon as my hands are free and sets a plate of brandy snaps between us.

I raise an eyebrow. "Do I need to be worried?"

She chuckles. "Whyever would you?"

"You've brought my favourite." I pick one up and bite into it, enjoying the caramel taste of the treat. They're at the perfect age where they haven't lost their crunch, but also have a little bit of chew already.

"Am I not allowed to do that?" She takes a seat next to me on my bed. I'm not lucky enough to have one of the bigger rooms with its own seating.

"Of course you are."

"But you're right, I do have an ulterior motive."

"Oh?"

"The officers-in-training are back."

The words hang between us as I let the meaning sink in and memories of the unknown man in the lake take over. I still recall the way his dark hair stuck to his face and the relieved expression beneath it as if it was still yesterday that I saved him, rather than several months ago.

"How long?"

"I don't know. They arrived the day before yesterday, so I suspect there's still plenty of time to meet them. There's a winter fayre in the gardens tomorrow, I thought we might go in case he's there," Gerda suggests.

Affection towards my friend floods through me. I'm glad I told her about what happened at the lake, and the way I want to see the officer I saved again. I know it's silly to think that way about someone I haven't even met yet, but there's something about what happened that keeps drawing me

to it and wanting to learn more about the person I saved. Maybe it's part of what being a mer entails. Apparently, we used to save a lot of sailors from drowning until one of our predecessors made it law that mer aren't to interfere in human affairs. I've never understood that part.

"I'd like that," I say, realising I haven't answered my friend even though I should have.

"I'm glad. I will tell Kai to entertain himself so we can have the afternoon to ourselves."

"Can you do that?" As far as I know, Gerda is the only friend Kai has.

She nods. "He's joined the archery team. He's a terrible shot, but they don't seem to mind. I think they're all just doing it for fun. Or they expect him to get better soon." An affectionate smile crosses her face.

"Things are still going well between the two of you, then?" I ask.

She takes a sip of her tea. "I think so. But I'm worried still."

"That Caryn will regain control of him?" I ask, thinking of the supposed Princess who tried to make my friends' prophecy come true with a broken mirror. I hope she hasn't returned, I saw what it did to both of them and I have no wish to see them go through it again.

"Oh, no. She's gone for good. That's how these things work. I'm sure you'll find out soon enough."

I sigh. "Is it bad that a part of me hopes I never do?"

"You know that's not how prophecies work," Gerda points out.

I do. And that's one of the many reasons I should put the officer whose life I saved out of my head for good. I can't let myself fall in love, especially not if it's unrequited. That's the fastest way for my prophecy to come true.

Not that I'm in love with someone I met once and didn't even talk to. I need to banish the mere notion of it for fear of what else it will bring.

"Mati? Are you all right?" Gerda asks after a moment.

"Sorry, I was lost in thought."

"Your prophecy?"

I nod.

"You can tell me what it is if you want to," she says softly. "You helped me with mine, I can help you with yours."

Indecision wars within me. Every part of me has been told over and over again about how I need to keep my prophecy secret for fear of

someone using it against me. But Gerda is my friend, she wouldn't do that. And she trusted me with hers when the time was right.

"I'm not ready," I admit.

"You don't have to be. But when you are, I'm here to listen."

"Thank you. I appreciate it." More than she can ever know. Or maybe not. She has been in my position and I should remember that.

She flashes me a warm smile and then turns back to the brandy snaps to give me a moment to compose myself.

We need to make a plan for the fayre tomorrow. If there's a chance I might see my officer-in-training again, then I need to wear the right thing. Especially with the cold snap of weather we're still having. I wouldn't be surprised if it snows again overnight.

As much as I don't want to admit it out loud yet, I'm excited at the prospect of going. Even if I don't see the boy who haunts my dreams, it'll be fun to be back out among the other students and to see what the academy has in store. They always pull out all the stops with events.

CHAPTER THREE

There isn't any snow, which is a good thing for an outdoor fayre, but there is a cold snap in the air that makes me glad that I have a warm cloak on for the day. Gerda is similarly wrapped up with a fur trim to hers. I may need to look at getting some to add to mine for next winter.

"Shall we go find the mead stall?" Gerda asks.

I chuckle. "Are you *that* cold?" Most of the times I've heard people say that before it's because they want a drink to warm them up.

"Or maybe I just like mead. Have you ever had it?"

"I don't think so." In reality, I know I haven't. Until Gerda, I haven't had a human friend to go to things like this, so there's a lot of things I've never had the ability to try as a result.

I'm looking forward to changing that.

"Come on." She takes hold of my hand and pulls me towards one of the stalls with lots of bottles lined up along the front of it.

My eyes widen. Are they all the same thing? Or are there this many different flavours of mead?

"Would you like a sample?" the girl manning the stand asks.

"Yes. Two please," Gerda replies.

"Original or one of our other flavours?"

"Original is good," she assures the girl. "Mati has never tried it before."

"Oh. In that case, you have to try this one. It's our best." The girl picks up a bottle and pours two small cups of the stuff, handing the first to Gerda and the second to me.

I sniff it, surprised by how sweet it smells. It almost reminds me of the fruit wines the academy serves at balls.

"To our good health," Gerda says, holding it up.

I tap my cup against hers then take a sip.

It's nothing like I expect it to be. It's sweet with a tang to it that I expect.

"That's delicious."

"Isn't it?" Gerda says with a grin. "Can I reserve a bottle to pick up later?" she asks the girl.

"Of course."

Gerda digs a few coins out of her pocket and hands them to the girl.

"I'll take some too," I say, getting my own money out. While Mother isn't too happy about me being at the academy, my parents are still sending me an allowance and paying my tuition. Thankfully. I don't know what I'll do if that changes. I suppose I can do without the allowance money if I have to. I have enough clothes and the academy provides all the meals and housing for us while we're studying, so it's only the fun things like this that I'll have to miss out on.

I hand the coins over.

"We can have the bottles delivered to your rooms for you, if you'd like?" the girl asks as she slides our money into the pouch she's wearing.

"That's even better than reserving them. Thank you," Gerda says.

"Just write your information down here and I'll get it sorted." She pushes a sheet of parchment towards my friend, who picks up the quill and starts to write it down for both of us.

I turn my attention away from the stall in front of us and scan the others for where we should head next. There's everything from lace to sweetmeats and even a stall selling small daggers and other basic weaponry. I imagine they're more on the decorative side than the functional one. Even I know to go to a blacksmith if I want something sturdy and it's not something we have under the sea. Most of our weapons are made from rock and bond, otherwise, they'd rust too quickly. My whalebone knife is one of my prized possessions.

A flutter of ribbons catches my eye as they dance in the wind. I'm not sure if that's what the stall is selling, but it's where I want to go next.

"Ready?" Gerda asks me.

I nod. "Do I need to..."

"No. I wrote down your room too."

"Thank you."

She hooks her arm through mine. "No need to thank me. You'd do the same."

That's true. I'm glad to have a friend on land who isn't mer. A sentiment I'm sure she shares. Well, kind of. As far as I know, Gerda is nothing more than a human unlucky enough to have had a prophecy about her. But she kept herself from making friends so it wouldn't come true. I'd like to think she's glad that the two of us have bonded since that.

"I thought we'd head over to the ribbons," I say, pointing at the stall in question.

"Oh, good choice."

"Do you know what they're selling?" I ask as the two of us start to walk over.

She shrugs. "No idea. But isn't that the fun of a fayre like this? And the samples. I do like trying things."

I laugh softly. "You're not wrong there." I still feel the fuzzy warmth inside from the mead the two of us drunk, and it wasn't even very much of it.

"I hope there are lots more..." Her words fade to background noise as a group of young men turn the corner.

I stall and come to a stop, dragging Gerda along with me.

"Mati, what..." She trails off as she sees the people I'm staring at. "Is he there?"

I bite my bottom lip as I scan the various faces of the officers-in-training, looking for the one I recognise. None of them spend enough time at the academy for me to know them through classes, and I've never danced with any of them at the balls which happen frequently.

The only one I'm going to be able to recognise is the officer I saved from drowning.

"Mati?" Concern comes through her voice.

Two of the officers-in-training move off to the side revealing the one face I'm looking for.

Unsurprisingly, he looks much better without nearly having drowned, with curly dark hair cropped close to his head and his uniform the normal navy blue of the officers-in-training. It's a dashing uniform, even if I don't understand what the training program is for. There hasn't been a war in the kingdoms for a long time, and even if there was, sending all of the trainee army leaders to the same place to train seems like it would be counterproductive.

Perhaps it's a deterrent from the possibility of a future war.

I push the thoughts of that aside. It doesn't matter what the reasons for the program are. It exists, and the participants go from academy to academy, never spending too long in one place, meaning we never get much of a chance to get to know them properly.

"Is that him?" Gerda asks, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I nod, unable to say the words out loud.

"He's handsome. Why don't you go over and talk to him?"

"And say what? *Hi, I'm Matilda, you may remember me from the time you nearly drowned..."*

"There are worse things you could say," she points out. "I'd be glad to meet someone who saved my life."

"Hmm. He probably thinks I'm a figment of his imagination."

A knowing look crosses Gerda's face. "That's all right. We can save that for another day." She turns us around and starts to pull me towards the other side of the fayre.

I'm not sure if I'm more disappointed or relieved that I don't have to go and talk to the person I saved. Maybe I'll be able to pluck up the courage to do so the next time I see him instead.

CHAPTER FOUR

I STRIP off the simple dress I save for when I need to come down to the lake. When I'm around the academy for classes or other activities, I'm expected to wear something fancier to befit my station, but fancier also means difficult to get on and off, which isn't very practical for being by the side of the lake.

The cold air kisses my skin, sending a shiver down my spine and a smattering of scales along my belly. It's not a surprise. My mer form is a lot more impervious to cold than this one is.

I don't waste another moment and dive into the water, letting the transformation take over as I do. Scales travel along my entire lower body and across part of my torso. If only my shoulders are out of the water, I can pass as human, but any more than that and my true form is revealed with deep blue glistening scales tapering down into the flippers at the end of my tail.

This form is so natural to me that I don't have to think about the different ways I need to move in it compared to my human one. The reverse is just as true now I've been spending a lot of time on land too. It's hard to pick which of my two forms I prefer the most when both of them have their advantages and their drawbacks.

I swim close to the surface, reaching my hand out so I can drag it through and create a ripple effect above me. I love watching how the water

dances in front of my eyes. Maybe it's because of how connected I feel to both the water and the surface.

"Hello?"

I stop swimming as the garbled word from above catches my attention. I keep myself afloat with a few tiny flicks of my tail. It's one of the first tricks we're taught as young mer as it allows us to stay in one place for whatever reason we want.

"Hello?" the voice calls again.

Are they looking for me? I find it unlikely, but what other explanation would there be for someone coming down to the lake at this time? Especially when the weather was so bad. If I hadn't needed to take a swim to stop my skin from drying out, then I wouldn't be out myself.

I propel myself closer to the edge of the lake before breaking the surface and looking around while making sure I keep my scales hidden underwater. While I'm sure most of the students at Grimm already know what I am, I don't want to take a chance in showing them when I don't have to. While many of them don't go out of their way to talk to me, they also don't do anything that would put me at risk. But that doesn't mean I want to show myself off to them.

"Ah, so you are here," a male voice says the moment my head is out of the water.

I turn around slowly, my heart skipping a beat as my gaze latches onto the person standing at the edge of the lake in a familiar navy blue uniform. The chill wind ruffles up his dark hair, blowing it to and fro despite the short length.

"Me?" I ask despite my nerves.

He chuckles and comes forward to sit on a rock. "Yes. Who did you think I was talking to?"

I shrug, being careful not to let it expose my scales as I do. My tail flicks back and forth beneath the surface, keeping me in one spot. I have no idea what he thinks I'm doing in the lake, but I'm not about to make it obvious.

"You might have brought a friend with you," I point out when he doesn't say anything.

"To a lake in the middle of the night?"

"It's only nine." There's plenty of evening left. If there was a ball going on, it wouldn't end for another few hours.

"True. But all of the people I know have a strict training regime that involves them getting up early in the morning."

"Don't you have that too?"

A small smile lifts at the corner of his lips, illuminated by the lantern he has with him. Little does he realise I don't need it in order to make him out, even in this light. The same part of me that allows me to see clearly underwater also works in the dark.

Except that he probably hasn't brought it for my benefit, but for his own.

"I do. But I also had someone I wanted to meet."

"Oh." My heart sinks despite knowing I should be fine with all of this. I don't know him, I shouldn't care that he's come to see someone else. "Would you like me to leave? I can give you some privacy."

He cocks his head to the side and studies me intently.

I sink a little to make sure none of my scales are on show. Though I doubt he can see much of them in the dim light. It's a good thing he isn't one of the normal boys who study here. I wouldn't have any chance of hiding who I am if he was.

Maybe he already knows.

"I came here to find *you*."

"Oh." I blink a few times, trying to come to terms with what he's saying.

"Are you going to ask why?" A hint of amusement comes through his voice.

"Would you tell me if I did?"

"Of course. You're the one who saved my life. Aren't you?"

A flush spreads across my cheeks. "Yes," I admit softly.

He nods. "I thought as much. I've been looking for you ever since we arrived back at the academy for training, but I didn't see you anywhere. Then I finally realised that I should come here considering this is the last place I saw you."

Smart. But that means he can't have asked around about me much if he has no idea where to find me. Then again, trying to find a dark-haired girl he saw in the dark when close to death probably won't help him much when it comes to describing me to other people.

"Thank you. I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't pulled me out of the water."

His gratitude startles me for a moment, it's not what I expect from anyone, especially not from an officer-in-training.

"You'd have managed to swim your way out." It's a lie, and we both know it, but I want to give him a chance to avoid admitting it.

"I can't swim. I've always wanted to learn but I've never had a chance."

I resist the urge to offer to teach him. I can't do that *and* keep quiet about my true nature.

"I'm glad I was here, then."

"Me too." He pauses, seeming to be lost in thought but it's hard to tell when I don't know him. "I'm Lewis, by the way."

"Matilda. But my friends call me Mati." Well, my human friends do. My name sounds different in mer.

"Do I get to be included in that number?" Lewis asks.

"If you'd like." I try to keep my excitement in check. All he's really said is that he's grateful I didn't let him die. Which makes sense. Anyone would feel that way.

He leans back on his rock, seeming to relax a little now he knows my name. "I hear there's a ball at the end of the week," he says.

"There is." Gerda has been talking about it ever since I got back to the academy. She loves going to balls now she has someone to dance with the entire night.

I'm only a little bit jealous about it. Especially as both her and Kai are good friends and make sure they spend some of their evenings with me. And it's not like the boys at the academy ignore me when they need a dance partner, though I imagine most of them chose me because they want to dance with someone already on the floor and need me to get to them.

I don't mind too much. I love to dance and that gives me an opportunity to.

"Are you planning on going?" Lewis asks.

Is that a hint of nervousness in his voice?

"Yes..."

"Would you save me a dance?"

Is he really asking that? I feel like I'm in a dream. I pinch myself beneath the water, wincing in pain when I end up doing it harder than I meant to.

"I'd like that," I admit.

Even in the darkness, I can see the wide smile that spreads over his face and the relief floods over him through the relaxing of his shoulders. He must have expected me to say no for some reason.

"I look forward to it," he says. "But I have to go now. I need to be up early with the other recruits to do the drills before lessons start and it will be torture if I don't get enough sleep."

I chuckle. "You're not the only one. I should be getting back to the castle before it's too late too." Though I still need to finish my swim if I want to have enough of a refresh to make a difference.

"Good night, Mati, I look forward to seeing you at the ball."

"Me too."

I watch him leave, a small smile playing at my lips the entire time. I wonder if Gerda is still awake? I need to tell her about what's happened tonight, she'll be so excited about it. A small part of me thinks I should wait until the morning, but I need to talk to her about it so I know it's not just a dream.

CHAPTER FIVE

I LEAN BACK in my chair, trying to focus on what the teacher at the front of class is saying, while failing miserably.

"You're still thinking about him, aren't you?" Gerda teases from beside me. She must not be paying much attention to the history of boats either. I know it has a fancier name, but I just can't bring myself to be more interested considering that there are easier ways for me to get about while at sea.

"No," I deny.

She raises an eyebrow. "Why don't I believe you?"

I sigh. "The same reason I didn't believe you when you said Kai was just a friend."

A small laugh bursts from her, forcing her to smother it quickly so we don't get caught.

"Are you saying you want more?"

I pause for a moment, considering the implications of what she's saying. It's dangerous for me to feel this way when I know that unrequited love threatens to make my prophecy into my reality.

But that's not what this is. Lewis asked me to save him a dance at the ball, which means he's just as interested in me as I am in him. Maybe. I don't have much experience in situations like this, so perhaps I'm reading it completely wrong. The only relationships I've seen up close are that of my

parents, and the one my best friend is forging with Kai. One of them is definitely not something I want to emulate, and the other is so new that it's impossible to.

"He wants me to dance with him at the ball."

"I know. You couldn't stop talking about it last night," Gerda teases. "I promise we'll make you look beautiful for the occasion."

A flush springs to my cheeks.

"Do you know how long they'll be here?"

"The officers-in-training?" she checks.

I nod.

Before Gerda can answer, the chair in front of us scrapes back and a perfectly made-up face forces its way into our conversation.

"Why are the two of you talking about the officers-in-training?" Lady Penelope asks.

"That's none of your business," Gerda bites back.

"Of course it is. I'm your superior in every way."

Gerda rolls her eyes. "Mati is a Princess."

"Of the mer, who knows what that's worth," Penelope responds snidely. "And you're just the daughter of a Baron."

"Not everything is about titles," I mutter.

"That's what you think. The only place that doesn't care about what we put in front of our names is the academy. No matter where you go after this, people will care." She turns up her nose.

"Lady Penelope?" the teacher calls, directing all of our attention back to the front of the room.

"Yes, Miss Drury?" she says sweetly, as if she hasn't just been unnecessarily spiteful.

"Is there something you wish to share with the rest of the class?" Miss Drury asks.

I suck in a breath, hoping she isn't going to say anything that'll get me or Gerda into trouble. It's not like we were goading her, but we were talking in class rather than paying attention and I can see our teacher not being a particular fan of that.

"No, Miss Drury," Penelope replies, avoiding eye contact and staring at the scribbled sheet of notes in front of her instead.

At least that should keep her quiet for a bit.

"Then please face the front and pay attention." She turns back to the board and starts to talk through more about the subject she's trying to teach us all about.

"That was a close one," Gerda mutters.

"Mmhmm."

"She's a piece of work." She nods towards Penelope as if I have no idea who she's talking about already.

"You can say that again." I don't know what I'd done to the girl to deserve the way she acts towards me. Then again, the answer is probably nothing. From what I've seen, she doesn't like anyone much. I don't know why. Maybe she's too caught up on what titles mean and doesn't actually think hers is good enough. I don't know why when the world is moving away from them being as important unless you're a Crown Princess.

"So, do you know how long the officers will be here?" I ask again.

Gerda shrugs. "I don't know, I'm sorry. But if Lewis asked you for a dance, then it's at least until then. Maybe you can ask him while you're at the ball?"

I nod. It's the only thing I can do to find out. I should have asked him while we were at the lake, but I didn't think about it. I was far too taken aback by the fact he was there at all.

Gerda reaches out and takes my hand in hers, giving it a squeeze. "It will all work out the way it's supposed to," she promises.

"I hope you're right." I know her words are coming from the right place, but it's hard to accept them as true when there's a prophecy involved.

Saying that, I haven't heard about any of the students at Grimm having their prophecy come completely true. They all seem to be able to stop it before anything bad happens.

I should remember that the next time I'm worrying about whether or not my own is going to become reality. But that's hard to do when it's hanging over my head.

We turn our attention back to class. While I don't find it interesting, I do have to pass it so I can move on to the next one. I'm not sure what it is, but I hope it's more engaging than Miss Drury's class.

It passes in a blur, but not because of what we're learning. Instead, I find my mind going to what I'm going to wear to the ball and how I'm going to do my hair.

A small voice whispers that Lewis won't actually ask me to dance, but I push it away. I'll be disappointed if the dance doesn't become a reality, but it'll be fine. I can still have fun at the ball without him. I've done it countless times before, and I'll do it many times again.

The bell in the tallest tower that signals the end of our lesson rings out. I sigh with relief, glad I don't have to listen to any more about boats.

I rise to my feet along with all of the other members of our class and start to pack up my belongings. Just as I'm about to leave, Penelope turns around and glares at me with daggers in her eyes.

I frown, confused about what I could possibly have done to her, especially when it was Gerda who spent most of her time sparring with the other girl.

"Come on, we should go decide what you're wearing for the ball," my friend says, slipping her arm through mine and pulling me along with her.

I don't ask how she knows I don't have another class right now. Gerda is great at remembering schedules, I suspect she knows mine almost as well as I do.

I go along with it, not wanting to waste any more time trying to work out what I've done to Penelope to make her dislike me this much.

CHAPTER SIX

The ball is in full swing by the time the three of us arrive. We don't mean to show up so late, but Kai managed to get himself a black eye during archery and it took some time for Gerda to convince him that no one will notice in the dim light of the ballroom.

I feel like Princess as I walk in wearing my deep blue gown which glitters in a similar way to how my scales do. It feels risky to be wearing something that reminds everyone of what I am, but it gives me confidence that can't be faked.

"Why don't we get something to drink while we work out if your officer is here?" Gerda suggests.

I nod, but stop in my tracks as I spot Lewis heading straight for me.

My heart skips a beat. He must have been watching for me entering.

He stops in front of me and gives a short bow. "May I have this dance?" He holds out his hand.

I shoot a quick glance at my friends, who both nod eagerly. I assume Gerda must have filled Kai in on everything that's going on. I doubt they have any secrets from one another at this point.

I place my hand gently in Lewis' as a large smile crosses over his face. We make our way over to the dance floor where several couples are already lining up for the next dance. I have no idea what it's going to be, but they teach us all the same steps in dance classes for this exact reason.

I'm not sure why, but the balls seem to be an important part of the time any of us spend at Grimm. Maybe they're just trying to keep the royals happy with the kinds of events they're used to in their home kingdoms, but I don't think so. It's got to be more than that. A more likely reason is that they want to foster connections between students and feel that a casual setting is more likely to promote that than classes.

I stand opposite Lewis and dip into a curtsy as he bows once more. The other students in line with us do the same, as we've been taught to do at the start of every dance. I'm not sure where the custom comes from, or what the purpose of it is, but no one seems to think twice about it other than me. Which makes sense. We don't dance the same underwater, though we do still have them.

The music starts and I move towards Lewis, our hands touching as we circle one another. It isn't until we're already moving that I realise the music is so familiar to me that I know which dance steps I need to be performing.

"I'm glad you're here," he says. "I've wanted to spend more time with you ever since you saved me."

"Why? For all you know, I could be a horrible person."

He chuckles. "A horrible person who saved someone she didn't know from drowning?"

"Well, when you put it like that..."

I spin away from him as the dance requires, but am back facing him a few seconds later. Thankfully, this is one of the dances where we don't have to spend a lot of time apart. And there won't be any changing partners in this one either, which is a relief. Some of those dances could be fun, but not when I want to spend most of it with one person.

"Is it all right if I call you Mati?" he asks once we're back together again.

"Of course. Why wouldn't it be?"

Dancing with him is effortless. Despite the fact he spends so much time away from the academy, he knows all of the steps.

"I'm not sure what the rules are for officers and titles," I admit.

"Ah, I see." He steps forward as I step back, moving us into a box step. "They make us follow the rules of whichever academy we're at," he admits.

"Doesn't that get confusing?"

He shrugs. "It did at first, but you get used to it. Each of the academies we go-between is so different it's easy enough to tell them apart. Grimm is

the only one where some people use titles and others don't. I haven't worked out why."

"I think it's mostly to do with who it is," I say. "From what I've seen, the lower-ranked nobles and those without titles themselves are more likely to use them when talking to people they think are above their station, even if they're a teacher. But the higher-ranked nobles and royals are more willing to drop the honorifics unless their ego is particularly big."

"I see. And that means you're a..."

I blush. "A Princess. Technically."

He raises an eyebrow.

"Not the inheriting type."

"Sadly, I don't think many Princesses are. The succession laws in most of the kingdoms are flawed to say the least."

"I take it you don't have an older sister, then."

"I do," Lewis counters. "And a brother between us in age. He's the one inheriting our Father's title, and I can assure you that my sister would do a much better job. Perhaps you would too, if you were allowed to inherit over a brother."

"It's not a brother that stops me from taking over from Father," I counter. "The monarch is elected in my kingdom."

His eyes widen. "That's even better than allowing daughters to inherit."

I laugh lightly. "You don't know that, you haven't seen how our kingdom is run." Though personally, I don't think Father does a bad job. That's why he keeps getting re-elected.

The dance comes to an end and I sink into a deep curtsy, hoping he'll ask for another dance. We're lucky that dancing too many times with one partner isn't seen as improper any more.

Except that all his talk of female children having a right to inherit gives me an idea. I don't have to wait for him to ask. I can do it myself.

"Would you like the next dance?" I ask, my heart pounding in my chest as I do. It's so outside the norm for these occasions and I don't want him thinking that I'm too forward.

"I'd like that." A wide grin spreads over his face. "I was about to ask you."

"Of course you were." I take his hand and let him lead me off into another dance.

And another one.

I spin past Gerda and Kai, giving them a small wave so they know I'm having a good time and they don't have to intervene. I know that both of them would save me the moment they thought I was in trouble.

The music for our fourth dance together comes to an end. I'm warm from the exertion but my heart has never felt lighter.

"Is it improper to ask you to dance again?" Lewis asks.

"Maybe we should get a drink first," I suggest. "But after that."

"I can take that deal." He holds out his arm and I slip it through.

"Officer Lewis."

I groan inwardly at the familiar figure in front of us.

"Can I help you, Lady..."

"Penelope." She's dressed like a pineapple with more frills and lace than anyone needs to be wearing. I don't think it helps that she's done up her hair into a cone shape either.

"Lady Penelope." Lewis dips his head, but I can feel how tense he is under my hand.

"I was wondering if you'd like to join the dancers," she says, shooting me a satisfied smirk as if she knows how much it'll make me uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry, but..."

"It would be rude for you to ignore all of the other ladies here in favour of one," she cuts him off.

Lewis throws me an uncomfortable look.

What do I do? I don't want Penelope to reveal what I am to him. That's a conversation I need to have with him. The look on her face says that's what's going to happen if I don't encourage Lewis to go with her.

"You should dance with Penelope," I say softly. "I'll catch up with my friends." I smile at him, but I don't think it reaches my eyes.

I can tell he wants to ask me if it's really all right, but doesn't want to say the words out loud.

"Come find me after?" I ask.

He nods, though I can still sense the unease coming from him. Does he know Penelope? Or does he just dislike the way she's barged into our evening?

If I'm feeling brave, I'll ask him about it later.

Lewis pulls away from me and lifts my hand to kiss the back of it.

My heart flutters. At least he still seems to be enjoying the time we're spending together.

Penelope doesn't give us a chance to exchange any more words and pulls him away.

A dreadful feeling settles in my stomach as I watch them walk in the direction of the dancefloor.

Lewis glances over his shoulder in my direction and I try my best to smile at him, but I'm not feeling it.

How did Penelope manage to ruin such a perfect evening?

CHAPTER SEVEN

The gravel crunches beneath my boots as Lewis and I walk along the path that threads through the grounds of the academy and around the tree line of the forest.

"I was surprised to find you at my door this morning," I admit.

"I wanted to apologise for last night."

"Why? It wasn't your fault?"

He sighs. "I know. But maybe I should have tried harder to get away from Lady Penelope."

"She wouldn't have taken kindly to that," I mutter.

"Ah, she's one of those."

"If by that you mean she's the kind of person who delights in doing things that make others uncomfortable, then yes, she is. I'm surprised she didn't tell me that if I didn't stay away from you, she'd tell you the truth about me." I almost trip over my words in an attempt to get them out. As soon as I saw him on the other side of my door, I knew I'd have to tell him about me being mer or I'm going to feel as if it's hanging over my head every time we're together. Especially if Penelope is around.

"What about you?" he asks.

I take a deep breath. "I'm mer."

"Oh, is that all?"

"You aren't surprised?"

"There aren't many people who would have been able to drag my body out of the lake. I figured that if someone of your stature was able to do it, then being mer was the most likely explanation."

"Oh." I chew my bottom lip. "I'm sorry I didn't say anything sooner."

"Me too. But I didn't want to make you uncomfortable by asking about it before you were ready to talk."

I place my spare hand on his arm. "Thank you. I appreciate it. It's difficult to talk about sometimes."

"Because of what people say?" He glances at me.

I nod. "They think we're monsters."

"Then they're wrong."

"You don't know that." I can't look at him. As much as I want what he's saying to be true, I've experienced too many people saying one thing to my face and then telling lies about my race behind my back.

"I do."

"Have you met many mer?"

"Not that I'm aware of," he admits. "Other than you."

"And you're making your judgement based on that?"

He shrugs. "What else should I be judging you based on? I don't judge everyone else based on the fact they're human, and we do some fairly despicable things. So why should I judge you based on the fact you're mer? Especially when I don't know anything about them."

"Huh."

"So I'm guessing you're not used to people using logic. I'm sorry that it's come to that, but I suspect it's people not understanding and so deciding to judge based on the little they actually know. Which normally seem to come from stories that other people tell."

"Hmm. I've never looked at it like that."

"I'm not surprised."

"So, what stories have you heard about the mer?" Maybe I shouldn't be asking him. I may be disappointed when I learn the answer.

"Not much. Only what some old sailors told me once. They said that there's as much chance of a mer saving you as there is of them killing you," he says.

I raise an eyebrow. "They aren't necessarily wrong," I admit. "It mostly depends on how much you've annoyed them."

"What did I do to deserve saving?" he asks.

"Nothing. I've just never been the kind of person who has any particular interest in drowning people. It sounds like a lot of unnecessary cruelty to me."

"And you're the mer Princess?"

"Kind of. But it doesn't really work like that. People just call me Princess because it's the nearest translation of what I am." It feels good to admit it to someone. It often makes me feel like a fraud to be introduced as a Princess when my people don't have the position.

"Ah, you said your Father was elected."

I nod. "And even if that did make me a Princess, I have two sisters."

"That must be a handful."

"And one of the reasons why I don't go back to the sea very often," I admit.

"Do you miss it?"

"Do you miss home?" I counter.

"Sometimes. But not as often as I thought I would when I left."

A chill breeze makes the bottom of my cloak flutter and sends a shiver down my spine.

"That's how I feel too. I thought I'd miss home, but it wasn't what I expected when I finally left. I miss the salt and the swimming more than anything, and I can get those from other places."

"Which is why you were in that lake."

"Yes." I pause. "What were you doing there though?"

He sighs. "We were skimming stones as part of a bet to see who can get it the furthest. It seems so silly now."

"I don't think so. Isn't the point of being at the academy so that we can have a little bit of fun along with our learning?"

"Maybe not if you're taking part in the officer training. They work us almost as hard as the Huntsmen."

"I've been seeing more of them at the balls recently," I say offhandedly.

"Surprising."

"I think a couple of them have started courting girls from the academy and it's brought more of them in from the forest for the events."

"That makes sense. It's one of the reasons we train in the academies and not in our own compound. They think it's important for us to learn how to interact with the people who will be ordering us about," Lewis says.

"Do you have a favourite academy?"

"This one."

"Why?"

"It has the most beautiful mermaid in it."

I snort, then cover my mouth in an attempt to disguise the sound. "That can't be the reason."

"It is now. But I'll admit it wasn't before. I like Grimm because it doesn't feel as pretentious as the others. Maybe it's because of the no-titles rule, or maybe it's because the scholarship students here change the way everyone interacts. I'm honestly not sure."

"I like it here too. It's my favourite of the academies I've attended." And not just because I met him either. Gerda plays a part in that. As does the lack of hostility towards me, even if people don't go out of their way to befriend me, they're not doing some of the horrible things they did at the previous academies.

"I'm surprised we didn't meet before, if you've been to other academies."

"Maybe we have. We'll both have crossed paths with a lot of people," I point out.

"Except that I'd remember meeting someone as beautiful as you."

I let out a surprisingly loud laugh. "Except that we both know that I'm far from the most memorable girl at the academy."

He stops the two of us walking and turns to face me. "Never underestimate the presence you have. It's more than just your physical appearance, but your kindness and your bravery too. Not many people would do what you did in the lake to save me, even if they had the ability."

I glance away, unable to take the earnestness in his eyes. He believes every word he's saying, I don't have any doubts about that. But it doesn't make it any easier for *me* to believe it.

"Thank you for saying that."

He steps forward and reaches out, stopping short of touching my cheek. I close my eyes, wanting more than anything for this to end in a kiss, despite not daring to think that way beforehand.

The loud clang of the bell tower makes me jump back, and seems to have the same effect on Lewis too.

He chuckles nervously and rubs the back of his neck. "I'm sorry, not sure why that spooked me."

"Me neither. Apparently hearing it every day isn't enough to make us accustomed to it."

"I lost track of time. I'm sorry, but I have to go to training."

"That's all right, I have to go meet Gerda in the library to do some of our assignments." Disappointment threads through me despite my words. I want to stay here and spend more time with him, but the assignments do need doing, whether I want to or not. Though I don't know what will happen if I don't hand them in, but I'm not willing to find out.

"Would you like to have lunch with me the day after tomorrow?" Lewis asks before we part ways.

"That would be lovely."

A wide smile spreads over his face at my answer. "Would you like me to pick you up from your room, or do you want to meet somewhere else?"

"My room is good." It'll give me a chance to freshen up after my morning of lessons.

He reaches out and takes my hand, lifting it to his lips and placing a gentle kiss there, setting my heart aflutter in the process.

"Until the day after tomorrow." He bows and then heads off in the direction of what I assume is his training grounds. I'm not sure where the officers-in-training even stay, but the grounds of the academy are vast and I haven't explored all of them.

I hesitate for a moment, wondering whether I should head back up to the academy and meet Gerda in the library like I'm supposed to, or if I should go to the lake instead. I can go another couple of days without a swim, but sometimes it's nice not to have to wait.

I shake my head. My friend is waiting for me, it would be cruel of me to leave her without an explanation.

I sigh and start making my way up to the library. I have lots to tell her anyway, and it will probably do me good to work out how I'm feeling, especially with the slight risk of my prophecy coming true to add into the mix.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I TAKE a sip of my tea and lean back in my chair, then set it back down with a sigh.

"Is everything all right?" Gerda asks.

"I'm just finding it hard to concentrate," I admit.

"Still thinking about your lunch with your officer yesterday?"

A furious blush spreads across my cheeks. "I can't help it," I mutter.

"Then you're not going to be able to help it even more in a moment," she teases, nodding in the direction of the door.

I look up in time to see Lewis striding towards our table with a small bouquet of flowers in his hands. I'm not sure where he got them from, but they're beautiful.

"I was hoping I'd find you here," he says once he gets to us. "These are for you," he says, handing them to me.

"Thank you." I can't believe he's done this, it's so sweet. "They'll look lovely in my room."

He beams at me. "May I sit?"

I'm about to say yes when Penelope sidles up to the table, apparently summoned by his presence. I try not to groan in frustration. He doesn't appear to be best pleased about her appearance either.

"Officer Lewis, it's good to see you again," she says, leaning in and placing a hand on his arm.

Jealousy rears up inside me, but I squish it down. It doesn't mean anything, especially when Lewis has just brought me a wonderful gift.

"Lady Penelope," he says, sounding as annoyed as I feel about the situation. It is a little reassuring that he's responding the same way.

"You promised to help me with my form for fencing..."

Frustration crosses through his eyes. I think. It's impossible to know for sure how he's feeling. It's foolish to think that he's reacting the same way as I am. Penelope is a stunning girl, even if she has some peculiar fashion choices in my eyes. And she's well connected too, something I don't think I can say of myself when my only friends are the children of two minor nobles.

"Yes, Lady Penelope."

"I'm free now, if you are," she purrs. "I've been looking forward to learning from someone as talented as you. And Officer James told me that you needed to prove you're able to teach people. He said he's free now to assess you."

I swear a small groan comes from him at that.

"So, we'll go?" Penelope asks. Her gaze flits to me and a cruel smile lifts at her lips. She knows what she's doing by interrupting the two of us, but she doesn't care one way or another that it could hurt me.

Lewis offers her a tight smile. "Yes, we can go."

I can tell he's only saying that because she's telling the truth about what he needs for his training, and that he doesn't want to disappoint the person who seems to be his superior officer.

Or maybe I'm reading too much into it and he *wants* to spend time with Penelope.

"I'll see you at dinner, Mati," he says, his voice softening as he says my name.

Except that I'm doubting that now too.

"I'd like that," I respond.

Penelope doesn't allow him to say anything else and starts dragging him off just like at the ball. I glare at her retreating form.

"She's the worst," Gerda mutters.

"So it's not just me who thinks that?"

"I'd say Lewis agrees with us too," my friend assures me.

I sigh. "Except that I keep thinking that I'm making up all the moments that he doesn't seem to like her," I admit.

"Why would you do that?" She takes a sip of her tea.

I glance over my shoulder to check there aren't any students close enough to listen in on our conversation.

"My prophecy," I whisper.

Why are we so secretive about them? I don't think I completely understand it. While not everyone at the academy has one, the majority of students do. They shouldn't be seen as shameful things, and yet we all keep them to ourselves unless we have no choice but to share them.

"What about it?" She tries to keep the excitement out of her voice, but I can tell she's thinking I'm about to tell her what it is. She isn't wrong.

"My prophecy says that I'll kill the person I love and turn into sea foam."

Her eyes widen. "That's..."

"Awful. Yes."

"I thought mine was bad," she mutters.

I flash her a weak smile. Hers was bad in a different way, but there's a big difference between dying and having someone hate you.

"What's your indicator that it's going to start?" she asks.

"Unrequited love," I admit. "Which is why I'm worried."

"You think that your feelings aren't shared by Lewis?"

"I'm not sure I *think* that, but I worry that."

She sighs. "Anyone with eyes can see he's head-over-heels for you. He brought you flowers." She points to the bouquet that's sitting on the table between us.

"I should get some water for those."

"You should. And maybe for yourself so you can start thinking straight again. He feels as strongly for you as you do for him. And if you're worried about it, then talk to him," she instructs.

"What if he tells me he doesn't feel the same?"

"Then we'll figure out a way to stop your prophecy from coming true, just like you did for me. You're not in this alone, Mati. You have us and we'll help you. Even if Lewis doesn't feel the same, do you really think he won't help? Especially when letting your prophecy happen will mean he ends up dead? I have to assume that motivates most people."

Despite the seriousness of the conversation, a small laugh escapes me. "Well, when you put it like that..."

"I know. I'm a genius."

"I'm just struggling to believe right now. We haven't even kissed."

"There's an easy way to rectify that."

"I know, the timing just hasn't seemed to be right," I admit.

She reaches out and gives my hand a squeeze. "It's all right, Mati, I promise. We'll manage to put a stop to this and keep you both safe."

I'm not completely reassured, but there's a spark of relief within me that I can't ignore. Hopefully Gerda's right and I don't have anything to worry about.

Before I can tell her as much, a servant approaches with an envelope in her hands.

"Princess Matilda." She dips into a curtsy, first to me, and then to Gerda. "I have a letter for you."

I frown. Hardly anyone writes to me. Only Mother when she wants something. "Thank you." I take it from her with a smile.

She disappears back out of the library to return to whatever she was doing before my correspondence arrived.

I tear it open, intrigued by what it could say.

I scan the scribbled words and let out an excited gasp.

"What is it?" Gerda asks.

"My sister is coming to visit." It's impossible to keep my elation out of my voice.

"Cordelia?"

I nod. Marguerite wouldn't want to visit. Nor do I think she'd argue against Mother to let her. But Cordelia is headstrong, the more Mother said no, the more she'll have pushed to be able to come.

"When is she arriving?"

"Tomorrow."

"I look forward to meeting her," Gerda says.

The excitement about my sister's visit manages to chase away the worries of what might happen with my prophecy. With Gerda *and* Cordelia on my side, there's nothing I can't manage.

CHAPTER NINE

"Do I really look the part?" Cordelia asks for what feels like the hundredth time.

"More than half the people who study here," I promise, without a word of a lie.

She looks beautiful in the light brown hair in an intricate braided style and the deep crimson gown she's borrowed from Gerda after declaring my wardrobe a travesty and deciding none of them would do if she wanted to make a good impression on the Lords and Ladies of Grimm Academy.

I link arms with her, drawing her towards the entrance to the ballroom.

"I'm so excited," she whispers. "I didn't think I'd get to go to a ball."

I chuckle. "They happen all the time, I'd have been more surprised if there *hadn't* been one while you were here."

"Even if Mother has only let me come for a week?"

"Yes, even then."

"I'm trying to get her to let me come here myself," she admits. "But I don't think she will without a prophecy."

"We don't know that."

As much as I don't want my sister to have to go through the stress of having a prophecy, I hate that she doesn't know for sure. But after I got mine, my parents banned all three of my siblings from going to the sea witch to find out if they have one too. Unfortunately, no one ever asked me what I thought of that idea. If they had, I'd have told them that I thought

they were playing with their lives. Just because someone isn't aware of their prophecy, it doesn't mean it won't come true. I have to wonder how many tragedies throughout the world could have been avoided by going to someone who could predict these things.

"I keep thinking I should go to the sea witch while they're not looking and see what she says," Cordelia mutters.

"She isn't to be trusted."

"You sound just like Mother."

"I promise, I don't mean to," I respond.

Gerda and Kai appear from down the corridor, cutting our conversation short. It's not that I mind my friends knowing about our family issues, but I don't want it to overshadow what's going to happen once we're inside.

We make our way to the grand doors and wait until we're gestures through.

"Princess Matilda, Princess Cordelia, Lady Gerda, and Lord Kai," the announcer calls as we walk through.

No one pays any attention, they never do. The only thing the announcements are any good for is if you're looking for someone in particular.

Today someone might be looking for me. It's unusual for the officers-in-training to be around for two balls in a row, but I'm not going to question my good fortune in the matter too much when it means I get to spend another night dancing with Lewis.

My gaze flits to Cordelia, who is scanning the room with an open mouth as she takes in the opulence of the decorations and of the dresses the girls are wearing. I felt the same way when I first came to a ball at Grimm. Our scales are our clothes beneath the surface, and we only wear simple things when we visit the surface for brief trips.

But this is something different. And I understand it. Without my scales, I need a way of expressing myself, and clothes are the way to do that.

It only takes a few minutes for Cordelia to be asked to dance. Despite not knowing any of the steps, she says yes instantly. I'm not worried about it. None of her potential dance partners will be rude enough to comment on it, especially when they have no idea she's mer. And then there's how quickly she picks up on that kind of thing. Cordelia has a special talent for picking up choreography.

I spot Lewis from across the ballroom and wave goodbye to my friends so I can head over to him. I'm sure he won't mind that I haven't waited for him to ask me to dance. He seemed to like it when I was the one who suggested we continued the dancing at the last ball.

I'm about to call his attention to me, Penelope steps between us in a flash of baby blue. Dread fills me as she begins to pull Lewis towards the dance floor. I don't know why she's suddenly so interested in him. Is it just because I am, or is there something more than that?

I watch in horror as the two of them start to dance, leaving me sidelined and alone.

Tears prick the corners of my eyes. I know whose fault this is, but I can't help feeling betrayed by them both.

I glance around, but can't find either Gerda or my sister, which only intensifies the loneliness I'm feeling inside. A salty tear runs down my cheek and wets my lips.

Horrified at the idea of crying in front of everyone at the ball, I turn on my heels and swiftly make my way out of the room. No one pays any attention to me, probably assuming I'm going for some air in the gardens or for a secret rendezvous. It's one of the advantages of only having these balls with the older students. No one asks too many questions.

As soon as I'm out of sight of the main corridor, I start to run back to my room, wanting the comfort of familiar surroundings.

I slam the door shut and sink down to the floor on the other side, not caring that I might scuff my gown. I rest my head on my knees as a loud sob overtakes me.

I may be overreacting about it all, I'm not sure, but something about seeing Lewis with Penelope this time has hurt more than the rest of them. Perhaps it's because once is understandable, but this many times? I must be imagining him disliking her. There has to be something between them.

But I need to ask him about it. I can't let the heartbreak I'm feeling turn into bitterness, that's how my prophecy will take hold and put me on a path to destruction.

CHAPTER TEN

THE POUNDING on my door rouses me from my stupor, but I don't move.

"Mati, open up, please," Cordelia says through the door. "It's just me."

I sigh and get to my feet, trying to ignore the ache in my knees from sitting on the floor. I'm not sure how long I've spent there. Not as long as I could have if Cordelia hadn't interrupted me, but I don't think it's been more than an hour either.

I crack open the door and let her in, relieved to find she really is alone.

"Is everything all right?" she asks, looking me up and down. At least she doesn't mention the tear tracks I'm sure are present on my cheeks.

"I'm sorry, I just...I saw Lewis dancing with someone and it upset me."

"You mean the girl who keeps getting in your way?"

I'm glad I told her about everything that's going on when she arrived. It's made this conversation much less frustrating.

"That's the one."

"I don't think you have anything to worry about. Everything you've told me makes it sound like he's into you and not anyone else."

I sigh and drop down onto my bed, resisting the urge to pull my knees to my chest again.

"I don't know." I pause, realising she's come away from something as exciting as her first ball at Grimm to talk to me. A surge of affection for her travels through me. "I'm sorry to take you from the ball."

Cordelia comes over and sits next to me, putting an arm around me as if she's an older sister rather than a younger one. "I don't mind. I came to see you, not the ball."

"And because you wanted to see Grimm," I counter.

"That too. But I still have plenty of time for that," she says. "Oh, I know what will cheer you up. Mother sent a present for you, but I forgot about it in all the excitement."

"You don't have to give it to me now..."

Saying the words is pointless as she's already on her feet and searching through the small suitcase she's brought with her. She pulls out a rectangular package and hands it to me.

I frown, confused about what it could be. Mother isn't one to send presents without meaning, which only puts me even more at a loss than before.

"Here."

"Do you know what it is?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "Mother just asked me to give it to you and said you'd know what to do."

"Is it me, or does that sound ominous?"

Cordelia shrugs. "It just sounds like Mother to me. She'd say that even if it was a seashell for your hair."

I snort. She isn't wrong about that.

Carefully, I unwrap the gift, equal parts worried and intrigued. I'm not used to presents from her.

The fabric falls away and I let out a small shriek, sending the knife within the bindings clattering to the floor.

"Mati? What's wrong?"

I point to it.

Cordelia's eyes widen as understanding dawns on her about what the knife is.

"Ah."

"Why would she give me this?" I whisper.

"I don't know." She leans down and picks up the knife.

"No, don't touch it."

"It's not going to hurt me," she points out, turning it over in her hands.

Despite knowing what it is, I still find it beautiful. The craftsmanship is exquisite from the coral handle to the whalebone blade. It's almost a

shame that something this fine has been used to create an instrument that will sever the bond between two people, but only if one of them drives it into the heart of the other.

"Does she want my prophecy to come true?" I whisper.

"Maybe she wasn't thinking about that?" Cordelia tries.

I bite my bottom lip, running through all of the ways this doesn't make any sense and trying to change that. Mother knows my prophecy, and that if I kill the person I love, I'll end up turning into sea foam. She has nothing to gain from that, I don't think.

"Or she could think that this won't kill the person who you stab with it?"

"Because stabbing someone in the heart is a good way to *avoid* killing someone," I mutter.

"We're not going to know unless we ask her," my sister responds.

She isn't wrong. We can try and work out what Mother is thinking for as long as we like, but we're not going to manage to get to the bottom of it. Neither of us are very like her, which will stop us being able to think in that way.

"We need to destroy it."

Cordelia frowns. "So you're not tempted to use it?"

"No. So no one else finds it and does damage without realising it." The knife is dangerous in the hands of people who know how to use it, even more so in someone who doesn't.

"Do you know how to?"

I nod. "The magic comes from the sea."

"Ah, to destroy it, we need fresh water."

"Exactly."

"We could take it to one of the bathrooms and run it under some water?" she suggests, though I can hear the doubt in her voice about whether or not that will work.

I'm right there with her. Somehow, I don't think that will be enough.

"We can take it to the lake. I wanted to show it to you anyway."

"We can go in the morning..."

"No. I want to go now," I counter. I want this to be over with and the only way to do that is to destroy the magical capabilities of the knife.

"All right. Let me grab our cloaks and then we can set off." She gets to her feet, then looks at me. "I promise, I had no idea what I was bringing to

you."

"I know. You don't have to tell me."

"I'm sorry she's doing this."

"It's not your fault," I assure my sister. "But I guess that explains why she let you come visit me."

A sad expression crosses Cordelia's face. "I thought she'd maybe decided it was best for us."

I reach out and touch her hand. "It *is* good for us, even if she hasn't thought of it that way. But after we've stopped my prophecy, we're going to have to ask her about it, and we're going to get her to take you to the sea witch."

"I thought you said she couldn't be trusted?" Cordelia teases.

"She can't. But she hasn't been wrong about anyone else's yet."

"And it's better to know than not," she finishes.

"Exactly."

"Thank you, Mati," she whispers.

I startle, unsure what she's talking about. "What for?"

"Caring about me enough to think about these things when something this big is going on with you."

"You're my sister. We're family."

She laughs bitterly. "Which isn't enough of a reason for Mother to avoid getting us into more trouble."

"True."

She hands me my cloak and I take it from her. I stand so I can swing it around my shoulders. It's too cold to be out without it, especially if we're going to be staying in human form.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The wind is surprisingly strong this evening and whips my hair around my face. I wish I'd thought to tie it back before the two of us came down to the lake, but it's too late for any of that now.

"It's beautiful," Cordelia admits as she takes in the lake and the surrounding area.

"It is." I've thought as much since the day the Headmistress showed it to me and suggested I could use it to transform in.

"Is there anything fun living in it?"

I shake my head. "Nothing much. Some fish, some frogs, other small creatures."

It had been disappointing not to be swimming with anything my size at first, but I've grown used to it over time. It'll be different if we can persuade our parents to let Cordelia study here too. The two of us can swim together sometimes if that's the case.

"Can we come back while I'm still here?" she asks me.

"Of course." She's not here long enough to need the swim in order to keep her skin right, but I imagine she wants to swim more for the fun than anything.

I don't want to waste any more time and pull the knife out of the pocket of my cloak.

"Do we need to do anything fancy with it?" Cordelia asks.

I shake my head. "I don't think so. Just throw it in and then let the water do what it's supposed to." I really hope this works. But even if it doesn't, I suppose the knife will be safe enough at the bottom of the lake where I'm the only person who can get to it. So long as I don't change my mind on stabbing someone through the heart, it'll be fine.

"Do you want me to do it?"

"No. I think it's best if I do." I don't think it'll make much of a difference when it comes down to it, but I know I'll feel better if I'm the one who does it.

I get up on top of the flat rock that graces the side of the lake and take a deep breath. This part is easy, but doesn't feel that way now I'm standing on the edge of the lake.

I close my eyes and let the knife slip through my fingers. A soft splash lets me know it's hit the water and is sinking to the ground. I open my eyes and wait for a few moments to make sure nothing goes wrong. Though I'm not sure what I'm expecting from it. As far as I know, it really is as simple as throwing the knife in a freshwater lake.

"It's done," I whisper.

"That was very underwhelming," Cordelia mutters.

A wry smile twists at my lips. "I'd rather it was underwhelming rather than dramatic." I hop down from the rock, already feeling lighter. "But that might not be it for my prophecy. Nothing in it says anything about *how* I kill them."

"So how do you stop it from happening?" she asks.

"I guess I have to make sure I don't fall victim to unrequited love," I say.

"And now is the time to find out, apparently," Cordelia says.

"What..." I trail off as I follow her gaze and find a familiar figure striding towards the lake.

"Do you mind if I go back to your room?" my sister asks.

I shake my head, unable to find words.

"Good luck." She's gone before I can respond, leaving me alone to prepare for the conversation to come.

Nerves jitter in my stomach, desperate to get free and do whatever they do once they are.

"Mati," Lewis says, his relief coming through my name. "I hoped you'd be here."

"Are you all right?"

"Are *you*? I saw you run off from the ball but I haven't managed to escape until now."

"From Penelope?" Despite all attempts not to let it, my bitterness shines through the words.

"Yes. That girl is a piece of work. She keeps threatening to report me to my superiors when I don't help her with her classes or dance with her. And when that doesn't work, she starts threatening you," he explains, a pained look on his face.

"Me?" I squeak, wringing my hands together as I try to make sense of what's happening.

He nods. "I'm not sure she can actually get you in trouble for any of the things she thinks she can, but I didn't want to take the risk when all it was costing was a dance. But then I saw you upset..."

I sigh and sit down on the rock. I make sure I leave enough room for him to sit next to me if he wants to, not knowing whether or not he'll take me up on the offer or not.

I'm a little surprised when he joins me.

"I'm sorry for running away," I whisper.

"I'm sorry for upsetting you. That's not what I wanted."

I sigh. "It's my prophecy," I admit.

"Ah, I did wonder."

I take a deep breath, readying myself to tell the second person this week about some of the details. "It says that I'm supposed to fall in love, but that it will be unrequited. And then I'll kill the person and turn into sea foam." I trip over the words in my haste to get them out. Now I've decided that I want him to know, I'm eager to get it over with so I don't prolong the horrible feeling within me.

"I see." He nods along as if thinking.

I wait, not knowing what I can say. I suppose I could assure him I'm not about to kill him, but I’m not sure that'll mean anything right now.

"And it's very specific about the feelings being unrequited?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Interesting. Which means that if the love is returned, then your prophecy will be over?"

"I guess so. I haven't really thought about that," I admit.

"I'm going to hope that you're talking about me."

I splutter. "You're going to hope that I'm talking about killing you?"

Lewis chuckles and reaches out to take my hand in his. "Not the killing part. I like a lot of things about my life too much for that. But I *do* hope you're talking about me when you say you have feelings for someone and that could be causing your prophecy."

"Oh." His words sink in a little more. "*Oh.*"

"I feel the same way, Mati," he whispers. "I want to be with you. Not Penelope, not anyone else, you."

"Even if I'm mer?"

"That has nothing to do with it," he assures me. "Except perhaps that I want to learn to swim."

"I can teach you," I promise. "If you want to see my tail that is."

"I'd love to see your tail," he admits. "But it will have to wait until the next time I'm at the Grimm, we're leaving in two days."

"Oh." I glance down at my knees but leave my hand entwined with his.

"We can write. And I'll be back before you know it."

I nod. "I know, I'm just disappointed that you'll be leaving so soon."

"Me too. But that's why I wanted to have this conversation with you before I do. The last thing I want is for you to wonder about how I'm feeling for the next few months when I can just tell you."

"Is this where I point out you haven't actually told me?" I ask, hope rising within me.

Lewis chuckles. "Mati."

The way he says my name is so full of promise. I look up to meet his gaze, seeing the same emotions I'm hearing in his eyes. I feel like a fool for ever doubting the way he feels.

"I know it's only been a few weeks, but I know with all my heart that I want to be with you. I'll put salt in the lake on my estate..."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know, but I want to. I will warn you that it's more of a pond than a lake, and more of a farm than an estate though."

"I don't care." If I'm honest, I'm surprised he even has that much. Most of the officers-in-training don't.

"I love you, Mati. Even if it's too soon..."

"I love you too," I whisper, knowing I mean the words. It's the only way to explain the way I've been feeling around him.

He reaches out and cups my cheek in his spare hand.

"Can I kiss you?"

"Please do."

My eyes flutter closed as he leans in. Anticipation builds within me as I wait for the kiss that will change my life forever. I won't know that my prophecy is stopped for sure until the Headmistress calls me into her office to tell me so, but deep within me, I know within me that it's over. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's something to do with the magic that creates the prophecies in the first place.

I push the thoughts aside as Lewis presses his lips against mine. I melt into him, enjoying the connection the kiss brings. I reach out and grasp his shirt in my hand, pulling him closer. We should have done this on our walk the other day and put all worries about my prophecy to bed before they'd become anything. But that's immaterial now, and if it means I get to go through my life enjoying kisses like this, then that's all right with me.

We break apart, both of us beaming as we stare into one another's eyes.

I don't know how long we sit there, but time doesn't seem important, and I'm just glad to be able to spend this evening with him before he has to go back to training, and I have to return home to learn the truth behind Mother's gift.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE SALTWATER of the sea doesn't feel as welcoming as it normally does. Maybe I feel more on edge because of the conversation I don't want to have.

Cordelia reaches out and takes my hand. "I'll be with you the entire time," she promises.

"Are you sure? I don't want Mother to blame you."

"Yes, I'm sure. We both know that she'll do the same kind of thing to me if I don't say something about how she's treating you."

I know she's not wrong, but that doesn't mean I want her to put herself in a situation that could make things worse for her.

"Thank you," I say instead of trying to dissuade her. I know my sister well enough to know when not to waste my breath.

"You'd do the same for me. Well, you *are* doing the same for me by trying to get her to let me see the sea witch."

"It's not the same."

"Maybe not. But it's still important and could impact my life in a big way."

"True."

"But right now, you're stalling," she says. "Let's get this over with."

I sigh, knowing she's right and wishing she wasn't. While the conversation about my prophecy with Lewis had been a lot easier than I thought it would be, I'm under no illusions that this one isn't going to be as

easy. Mother isn't particularly forgiving on a good day, and especially not when she thinks she's being accused of something. Even if she actually did it.

I flick my tail and propel myself into the family room. Thankfully, only my parents are in here. It's better if neither of my other siblings are present, they both take Mother's side at every opportunity.

"Matilda, this is a surprise," she says as she spies me. "I didn't realise Cordelia had convinced you to come back to the sea." There's no mistaking the glee in her voice. She wants me to come back, but not because of what's best for me. Her feelings on this are based on the same thing the rest of them are.

What's best for her.

"I'm not back for long, just a visit," I say through gritted teeth, though with the whistles and clicks of our language, some of the effect is lost.

"How disappointing."

I almost believe her.

"I actually came to ask you something."

She raises an eyebrow. "And a letter wouldn't have done?"

"No." My heart races and the urge to fidget becomes difficult to ignore. It's easier to do it and not get caught when wearing a dress. Another reason to like being on land more.

"Well, what is it?" she demands.

"Why did you send me the enchanted knife?" I ask, holding my head up high so she knows she can't try and lie to me.

"I thought you needed it."

"You thought I needed a cruel instrument that would kill both the person I used it on and me?" I try to keep the shock and disgust out of my voice, but I don't think I manage. I can't believe my own Mother would do something like that.

She tuts. "It wouldn't have killed you."

"It would. Do you not remember my prophecy?"

"That's rubbish. Just the sea witch trying to gain control."

"It isn't rubbish," I counter. "The Headmistress told me it was very much real when I went to her office after we dealt with my prophecy." It had been such a relief to hear her say that it was all over and I didn't have to worry about it any more.

Even more so when she said I could stay at Grimm no matter whether or not my parents said I could. She offered Cordelia a place too. With the way this conversation is going, I feel as if we might need that promise.

"You didn't sever your connection to the land dweller?" Mother narrows her eyes.

"No."

"You never understood the connection we have with the sea. Or the importance of it."

"I do, Mother. What I don't understand is why you're so willing to throw my life away."

"I didn't *throw your life away*. I was trying to get you to come back to the place that will always care for you and protect you."

"Giving me a tool that would end my own life too isn't a way to protect me," I say, trying not to let my anger overtake me and end up with me saying something that I'll regret.

"I did nothing wrong." Mother crosses her arms.

"Mother..." Cordelia starts.

She narrows her eyes at my sister, silencing her without saying a word.

"Thank you for your answers, Mother. I'll be returning to Grimm now." I turn around and flick my tail so I'm ready to leave the room.

"If you go back, you'll no longer be welcome in this kingdom," Mother says, her tone dark and serious.

I freeze for a moment, considering my options. She doesn't actually have the power to do that, but I'm a fool if I think Father won't bend to her will. But if he ever loses an election, I can return.

The alternative is not going back to the academy, not being able to see my friends or Lewis ever again, not being able to play my fiddle. I'd end up miserable and hating everyone if I stay here.

I close my eyes, scared of the words I'm about to say, but also feeling freer than ever that I *can* say them.

"I'm returning to the academy," I repeat, certain that it's the right decision for me.

I don't wait for Mother to respond. At this point, there's nothing that she can say to change my mind, especially as I know she won't retract her ultimatum.

I sense rather than see Cordelia follow me. I want to tell her she shouldn't, but she's smart enough to be able to make her own decisions.

"Where do you think you're going?" Mother demands, presumably aiming the question to my sister.

"With Mati," she responds flatly.

"No, you're not..."

"I am, Mother. Even if that means I'm also banned from the kingdom."

A small smile creeps over my lips at her insubordination. I wouldn't have been brave enough to say it at her age, even if I'd wanted to.

I almost expect Mother to take back her decree now that Cordelia has talked back to her, but she doesn't. I should know better.

Cordelia swims ahead of me, apparently not even waiting long enough for Mother to respond.

I follow her in silence until we're away from the kingdom and out in the open ocean. It'll only take us an hour or two to get the shore closest to Grimm, and not much longer to get back onto the academy grounds. We'll need to have a meeting with the Headmistress once we're back to tell her that we'll need the academy's support, but she's already offered that, so I don't think it'll be a problem. I have to wonder whether or not she suspected once the two of us returned to our home.

"I can't believe I did that," Cordelia whispers.

"Are you all right?" I ask her.

"I don't know. I feel scared and free."

A small laugh escapes me. "I'm sorry, that's just how I felt back there too."

"Then that's a good thing."

I reach out and take her hand, giving it a squeeze. "We have one another no matter what happens," I promise.

She nods. "I know."

"And if you want to go visit the sea witch, we can."

"Oh. I hadn't thought about that."

"It's up to you. We can do it another day. We'll come on one of the academy off days."

She nods. "I think I'd like to do that."

"Then let’s get home so we can start putting this behind us."

Cordelia smiles at me. "I like the sound of that."

I do too. As much as I'm sad she had to do what she did, I'm glad to be returning to Grimm with my sister by my side.

EPILOGUE

Six Months Later

I BRUSH out my skirt and push a strand of dark hair behind my ear, studying my reflection in the mirror at every angle possible.

"You look fine," Cordelia says from her seat on my bed.

"She's not wrong," Gerda supplies.

I sigh and turn to face the two of them. "But..."

"We know. We go through this every time Lewis comes back to the academy," Gerda points out.

We've been lucky that he's been back several times in the past six months. Sometimes, the officers-in-training barely return within a year. I don't pretend to understand their schedule, but I'm also not complaining when it means I get to see Lewis more often.

"This time is different," I mutter.

"You say that every time too," Cordelia says.

"This time is *really* different." I don't know how I know, but I can sense it. This visit is going to be different from the others, I'm sure of it.

"You look beautiful, Mati," Gerda assures me. "But if you spend any more time obsessing about it, you're not going to be ready in time to be at the front door when they arrive."

My eyes widen. She's not wrong. "All right, I'm going. Thank you both." I wave at them, not bothering to throw them out of my room before I leave myself. I trust both my friend and my sister, I don't need them to leave before me.

I rush down the corridors, ignoring the few other students who are hanging around. No one seems to be as excited as I am, probably because anyone else who is waiting for the officers-in-training to return is already at the front doors, not wanting to miss them. I shouldn't have wasted so much time getting ready after all.

I shake my head. It'll be fine. Even if I'm not there the exact moment they come through the gates, I'll be there soon enough.

As it turns out, there's nothing for me to worry about. I slip through the front door of the academy and onto the steps just as the main gates swing open and the officers-in-training start marching in. They're moving in perfect time with one another, like they always do. I find it both impressive and creepy, but Lewis has assured me it's perfectly normal and one of the first things he learned to do when he joined.

I bounce up and down on the balls of my feet, searching the faces for the one I want to see.

They line up in front of the building and wait to be dismissed by Officer James. As one, the whole group salutes.

And then they break apart.

I rush down the steps and through the small crowd of people so I can fling myself into Lewis' arms.

He catches me and swings me around before placing me gently back on the ground and kissing me.

I close my eyes, enjoying knowing that the two of us can spend time together once more.

"Come with me," he says as he takes my hand and draws me towards the forest on the academy's grounds.

I don't need him to tell me that we're heading to the lake, that's where a lot of our important conversations happen. It always offers a sense of peace and privacy for us. While I know other students use the area from things they've said, I've never seen any of them there.

"What's wrong?" I ask him once we get there.

"Nothing," he promises. "In fact, I think everything is *right*."

"You're going to have to explain more."

"Why don't we sit down?" he suggests, gesturing towards the rock.

I take a seat, wondering what he's up to, but not wanting to rush him. He sits next to me, close enough that we're touching.

"I had a couple of leave days when we were at the academy closest to where my family lives," he says.

"Oh?" I can't help but feel a little disappointed that he didn't want to spend those days with me.

He takes a deep breath. "So, I went to see Father to talk to him about a few things. Mostly to see if the farm he set aside for me can be made ready for when I graduate."

"Is it?"

He nods. "It will be. There are a few things that need working on. I asked him if he'd spare some of his workmen to make the pond bigger."

"You didn't..."

"Of course I did. I'm not joking when I said it was a pond. You need more space than that."

"That's so sweet." My heart swells at how thoughtful he's being.

"I also asked him to make some changes to one of the smaller buildings. I know Cordelia is at the academy for the next few years, but if she needs somewhere to stay after she graduates, I want to make sure she has somewhere," he says.

Tears spring to the corners of my eyes. How have I gotten so lucky? "Thank you," I whisper.

"You're welcome. But that's not all I talked to him about."

"Oh?"

He digs in his pocket and pulls out something small, holding it out to me.

"It's not an official betrothal yet, but I wanted to give you something as a sign of how seriously I take the two of us."

A lump forms in my throat as I take the small silver ring from him. It's simple, but beautiful, with twisted bands and knots engraved into it.

"Oh, Lewis."

"It's a family ring. Father gave it to me gladly and said he couldn't wait to meet you. But not as much as Mother, I don't think. The moment she found out about you living at the academy, she demanded that I invite you and Cordelia to our family house for the next holiday. You don't have to say yes if you don't want, but the offer is there."

I reach out and put my hand on top of his. "We'd love that. Thank you. And please thank her for me too."

It seems that while I may have lost part of my family for now, I've gained another one. And the fact they're so willing to accept Cordelia along with me says everything I need to know about them.

I meet his gaze as I slip the ring onto my finger. It may be stunning, but the true beauty in it is what it means.

I reach out and cup Lewis' cheek with my hand. Neither of us move, we just sit and stare at one another, enjoying the promise that is our future together.

Thank you for reading *Song Of Seas*, I hope you enjoyed Mati's story. If you want to continue with the *Once Upon An Academy* series, it continues with *Roses Of Regret*: http://books2read.com/rosesofregret

AUTHOR NOTE

Thank you for reading *Song Of Seas,* I hope you enjoyed it.

If you want to discover more about Gerda and Kai's prophecy, you can find it in the *Grimm Academy* series in *Frosts and Fears*. Cordelia will also have her own story (*Princess Of Scales*) as part of a future series set at Grimm Academy. You can join my Facebook Reader Group or mailing list for updates on when the series is available.

Growing up, *The Little Mermaid* was my favourite fairy tale, and it's so much fun to retell it. This isn't the first time I've done it either, my other retelling is called *Balanced Scales*. It follows a mermaid who loses her soul and has to journey onto land along with her seal familiar, to recover it, along with the souls of all of her people who have lost them.

Stay safe & happy reading!

- Laura

ALSO BY LAURA GREENWOOD

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura is a USA Today Bestselling Author of paranormal, fantasy, and urban fantasy romance (though she can occasionally be found writing contemporary romance). When she's not writing, she drinks a lot of tea, tries to resist French macarons, and works towards a diploma in Egyptology. She lives in the UK, where most of her books are set.

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Table of Contents

Title Page
Contents
Copyright
Keep Up To Date
Blurb
Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Epilogue
Author Note
Also by Laura Greenwood
About the Author